



The Way It Should Be by lovinglybreex

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Summary: After Eleven's disappearance, Mike just isn't the same. Quite simply, he needs her. And he's determined to get her back...but, will El want Mike? Will the two really manage to cope with a lifetime of fear and paranoia, constantly running from bad men, bad things and bad dreams? Or will they finally receive the happiness they deserve?

1. Broken Promises

He still hadn't taken her fort down. He couldn't. Despite how much it pained him to look at, despite the way he could swear his heart had been ripped in two - more than that, it was completely shattered. And El had taken all the splintery little pieces with her.

Mike sniffed, angrily wiping at the tears that had managed to slip through the dam he tried so hard to keep in place. He really was trying. For his Mum, his dad, for Dustin, Will, Lucas and Nancy. They wanted normality, for things to be what they once were. He wanted - no, needed, to find her. He put all his energy into school, planning campaigns, helping around the house, all the things he had done previously. And looking for El. He couldn't just pretend it hadn't happened... Like *she* hadn't happened.

Mike hated the way everyone acted as though nothing out of the ordinary took place that week. He supposed it was just their way of coping but, still. Eleven deserved to be remembered. In more than the pitiful glances Mike was now accustomed to receiving. Even those who were not aware of the extraordinary girl's existence could see a very drastic change in the young boy's behaviour.

Michael Wheeler no longer put his hand up eagerly to answer the teacher's questions in school. He sat soundlessly, taking notes, keeping his head down but more often than not, staring off into space. As much as he tried to busy himself, nobody overlooked the silences and awkward, uncomfortable fake smiles or the god-awful hollow look to his dark eyes and the bruise-like shadows beneath them. He wasn't eating; wasn't sleeping. He'd become a shadow of what he was before, to put it poetically. Although, absolutely nothing of what the dark-haired boy was feeling was poetic or desirable in the slightest. Even Troy and James seemed to sense that they should not to push him too much.

'Doubt its because they feel any sympathy for him,' Lucas confided to Will and Dustin bitterly, when he thought Mike was out of earshot one day, 'Those dicks don't have an empathetic bone in their body. You simply can't get any joy out of breaking somebody who is already beyond repair.' Dustin and Will did not agree with the last

part, they knew exactly who could 'repair' Mike. And they damn well weren't going to give up on their friend. Mike or El. Lucas' opinion on Eleven's current welfare was no secret though, so there was no point in arguing with him. He was not a bad friend. He just relied heavily on solid, scientific, statistical facts. Nobody blamed him, even if they did wish he would keep his mouth shut at times, for Mike's sake more than anyone's.

A small snuffle escaped the boy as he rose to his feet. His whole body ached, from falling down amongst the foliage of the forest floor as he looked for his missing friend, or from the immense guilt weighing down on him, he wasn't sure.

If he closed his eyes, he could still see her. Sat in her fort, fiddling with his supercom, levitating his figurines with her mind, or just looking up at him, with her wide, curious eyes. God, he longed to see those eyes again. It was crazy, utterly inconceivable, how much he missed her. They had only shared a week together, yet they had been through so much; made so many memories. Had a million more to make. There were so many promises between them. So many things left to say. He couldn't live without her. Not now and not ever again. Everything just felt *wrong* without her by his side. That week had been the best of his life, and also the worst. All Mike knew was El had made him feel things he hadn't ever felt before. Changed him, for the better. And being without her was definitely changing him, definitely *not* in a positive way.

Pretending that he could see through the tears clouding his vision, turning his little hideout in the basement into dull smudges, Mike glanced towards the small-but-comforting shelter he made for a terrified girl he hadn't then known - now empty and idle, shouldered his backpack, climbed out the window, and once again made his way towards the forest for yet another endless night of searching.

2. 5184000 Seconds

1440 hours. 86400 minutes. 5184000 seconds. That's how long it had been since the night Eleven vanished. *Vanished*. She's just missing, a little lost. Not dead. That had become something of a motto to the resolute Michael Wheeler. It would all work out just fine. She would be found soon. Mike would find her. She'd be terrified, sure. A little - well, exceptionally - shaken up. But she would be home, safe and warm and no longer alone. El could stay with Mike, have all the eggos she could ever want, (as well as other, nutritional, food too) and they could, eventually, cross that tiny, rickety little bridge between 'friends' and 'more than friends'. When they were both ready, of course. If El wanted it. There was going to be quite a bit of explaining in order for that to happen, however. He could be patient. Whether it took Eleven months or even years to grasp the concept of 'dating', he would still be there. Even if it took longer still for her to like him back. Mike would teach her all the words and all the logistics for everything she could hope to discover and explore. They could have their cliché little happily-ever-after, forget about the bad men and the monsters; share adventures together. That is, adventures of the usual non-life-threatening variety.

These were the thoughts that kept Mike going, prevented him from even considering the possibility of never finding El, or the possibility of never finding her alive. *Two months*. It had been exactly two months since he last looked into her beautiful, mesmerising chocolate brown eyes. Although, in that final moment, they hadn't been the same captivating eyes he adored. At the time, they were a horrifying crimson red. Unsettling. He shuddered at the memory.

It was too late for them to go to The Snowball together. That was a fact that wounded the benevolent young boy deeply. He had broken his promise. But, luckily, The Snowball was an annual event. They could still go together. To that cheesy, incredibly low-budget dance. Eventually, Mike would make good on his promises. He wouldn't disappoint her.

He hoped she was okay, wherever she was. The Upside-down, he figured, was the most probable scenario. He prayed the demogorgon

really had perished. Breathed it's last breath. Met one's end. However you want to phrase it, point being: it would not bother El, or anyone else, ever again.

Mike was roused from his thoughts with a flinch as the long, lanky figure of Jonathan Byers fell through the front door. 'Have the others gone home?' He questioned, noticing the absence of Dustin and Lucas, receiving a small nod from the younger boy. 'Yeah, they left about a half hour ago. My parents are at work and I thought Nancy was with you?' Jonathan looked sheepish. 'Uh...we um - we had an argument.' Came the mumbled response. Shortly after everything that happened, Jonathan and Nancy had started seeing each other. Mike felt as though he should probably ask about what had happened, but he wasn't really in the mood for awkward conversations about his friend's older brother's girlfriend issues. Too complicated. Especially when the girlfriend in question was his sister.

Will's brother shuffled nervously from foot to foot before wandering off into the kitchen, returning a few moments later with two cans of soda. He offered one out to Mike and flopped down next to him on the scruffy couch. Quickly rearranging himself so that he was not crushing the sleeping form of his little brother. Approximately 30 seconds after the other boys had left, Will had drifted off and Mike had been left alone with his thoughts. Thoughts that mainly, well - wholly, consisted of El. The two sat together in comfortable silence, until Jonathan broke it with a simple question, voices hushed so not to wake the resting boy. 'How's Will been?' And that is how conversation about The Upside-down began.

Will hadn't ever been the same since *the ordeal*, as Joyce and Hopper referred to it. After his return, he would often stop in the middle of a sentence or task, his face would become devoid of all colour or emotion and, eyes wide, he would hurriedly excuse himself and flee the room. Nobody could fathom why, until recently. Recently being when Jonathan went looking for his sibling, following the sound of his coughing and spluttering, only to see him spit out a repulsive, slimy creature before dissipating like smoke. As you could imagine, there were quite a few questions, and also tears, when Will Byers came back a few seconds later.

According to Will, he hadn't known he was actually travelling

between his world and The Upside-down, having presumed his little 'episodes' were just flashbacks. The truth was not comforting. But it was happening more frequently, and he was becoming trapped in the parallel universe for increasingly prolonged amounts of time. Nobody knew what they could do to prevent it, and they had nobody to turn to. Who would believe them? Even Lucas had needed to see it with his own eyes, before he would so much as discuss it, and he had met the demogorgon. Dustin, however, greeted the news with an uncharacteristic sobriety. '*Slugulus Eructo*' he had whispered when he heard about the slugs, but otherwise remained silent, eyes downcast.

'I wish we knew how to stop it,' Jonathan murmured. 'But we don't even understand what it is.' Mike considered this for a second. 'I think, it would help if we knew more about The Upside-down itself. But the chief said the portal in the lab was closed off after the last attack, right?' Suddenly Jonathan was on his feet. His eyes afire with something Mike hadn't seen in a long time. Hope. 'Yeah, yeah he did say that. But - But there was another portal...in a tree in the woods. The one me and Nance found. Maybe it's still open. Maybe - Maybe we can cure Will. I could find it again. I could do it. I could save him. I'm certain of it...' He was rambling now, but Mike didn't interrupt. His mind was racing with other things. *Another portal. Another entrance to The Upside-down.* Abruptly, Jonathan's words cut-off. 'Mike,' He said slowly, the single syllable painfully drawn out. 'That creature. It attacked nearly every time someone tried to communicate with the other-side. You don't suppose...' Sincere, oval eyes looked down at Mike. 'What if every time someone tried to talk between realms, every time El visited that place, in her 'bath', it opened another portal? What if there are portals everywhere? All we need to do is find them.'

3. This is an emergency

A/N: So I just spent 20 minutes editing this entire thing for my wif to crash and make me do it all over again! Anyways, Hey guys. I'm really sorry about having such a massive delay between chapters - I've had issues with wif so I haven't been able to update. But I have had a lot of time to work on this chapter (and I'm much happier with the length of it) and I've also had time to work on prompts and ideas and characterisation and stuff so I hope I've managed to better myself a little. This is my first ever fanfic (and the first work I've allowed others to read) so all your support and favourites and follows - and especially reviews, really mean a lot to me. I'd really appreciate some constructive criticism, if you have the time. Alsoo, I've had a few ideas for fluffy filler chapters later in the story and I'm really excited to write them, but I'd like some suggestions from you, so I can maybe dedicate some chapters? Okay, on with the story! I really hope you like it.

-Bree

'Lucas, Lucas! Do you copy? This is an emergency - Are you ignoring me? Over.'

'Don't ignore me. Over.'

'Lucas.'

'THIS IS AN EMERGENCY.' The dark-haired boy flinched as he realised how loud he had been. He did not want to wake his parents, and so dropped his voice to a whisper.

'...Over.'

Mike shifted, adjusting the cushion he had been leaning on.

This could take awhile.

'Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas Lucas. Lucas! Lu-'

There was a small, angry burst of static and a pleased smirk tugged at the corners of Michael Wheeler's lips.

'What. Is. It. Now?' Lucas' voice hissed. He was clearly annoyed. Mike automatically looked down at his watch. 3:15. The numbers blinked at him lazily, either unaware or uncaring that they were a slap in the face to the anguished pre-teen. Guilt coiled itself around him, it's

weight like an unwanted extra blanket - suffocating. He squinted his eyes closed tight, as if it could prevent the onslaught of memories.

'Mike? You did not just wake me up at 3am to tell me absolutely nothing.'

'Over.' He muttered bitterly, thinking his friends hesitation was due to his unwavering insistence that you must always say over when you were finished talking. How else would you know that they were done? Lucas rolled his eyes but smiled slightly at Mike's stubbornness.

The shaking, freckle-faced boy cleared his throat. 'Uh, I'm sorry Lucas I didn't realise the time. I have news though. Come over as early as you can tomorrow. Bring Dustin and Will. Please, this is important. Over.' He hoped the other boy wouldn't notice the catch in his voice, or be bothered by how little information he had given him, after waking him up so urgently. He didn't want to have to answer any questions right now.

'As early as I can come over today, you mean,' Quipped Sinclair, he had a feeling that Mike was upset, but he knew him and from the way his words had rushed together, he didn't want to talk. Lucas hadn't ever been very good with talking about feelings, or very perceptive when it came to identifying them. Feelings were not factual or statistical and emotions had no formula for working out. He was frequently insensitive and it wasn't something he was proud of, but he was often glad when Michael wouldn't talk about how much Eleven's death had devastated him. Not that Mike would admit to El's (almost certain) fate. In all honesty, Lucas thought that his friend's refusal to give up was doing him more harm than good. His adamance was becoming toxic. At least admitting that El was gone would be closure. 'Okay, Mike. See you in a few hours. I'll tell the guys. Over and out.'

'Will? Where are you going? It's barely eight o'clock.' Joyce enquired, voice full of parental concern and exhaustion.

'To Mike's. I've left a note on the table,' Came the soft-spoken reply. 'I think he's had an idea for our group science project or something. Apparently it's incredibly urgent. He woke poor Lucas at three in the morning.'

Joyce dithered. After Will's return, she had - understandably - become

very reluctant to let either of her children out of her sight, especially her youngest. Now that she had him back, she certainly wasn't going to let him go again. She couldn't bare it if anything more happened to their little family, but she also knew that she ought not be too over-protective. She did not want to smother the budding teenager. Did not want him to start lying and sneaking out because then who knows what would happen? Joyce knew she just had to let them have their freedom and enjoy their childhoods, the precious years they had left. To cherish every moment they had together.

'Okay baby have fun, ask Karen to call me when you get there please.' Will nodded and grinned at his mother, bounding over to give her a hug before he left.

'And be back before five, okay? Hopper is coming over!'

It was forty seven minutes past nine by the time everyone had gathered in the basement, Dustin being the last to arrive, despite his eagerness.

'Finally! We've been waiting ages.' Lucas exclaimed as Dustin shuffled down the stairs.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. There was a small incident in which a stray cat climbed through the bathroom window, that i may or may not have accidentally left open, and vomited in my parent's bedroom.'

Mike opened his mouth and began to complain but was swiftly cut-off.

'You weren't the one cleaning up cat puke.' Dustin stated, pointing at his friends threateningly before collapsing into a seat. The group of friends laughed, smiling at the curly-haired boys awkward ability to get himself into peculiar situations. It wasn't quite the super power Dustin wanted.

'Okay, so...' Began Mike before launching into an explanation of everything he and Jonathan had discussed. The others remained mostly quiet as he spoke, excluding Dustin's anticipated outbursts of 'oh shit oh shit oh shit'.

'It's kinda weird to think that I was just asleep next to you that entire time.' Mumbled Will, after Mike had finished telling them everything. An uncomfortable atmosphere had settled over the group. Nobody really knew what to say next. Everyone knew what Mike wanted, but they'd tried looking for El so many times. They had spent entire days scouring those woods for any sign of her, if there were still open

portals, wouldn't they have already found them?

'You mean you want us to try and find a portal to rescue El?' Dustin's voice was unsure and fearful. Worry replacing his usual, characteristic, boyish excitement.

Mike jerked his chin forward in a small nod, undaunted by the danger that would lie ahead. 'And if we can't find a portal, we will make one.'

'Oh shit.'

There were no awkward silences this time. Noise exploded from the small group, everyone shouting over each other at once. Well, Mike, Lucas and Dustin were busy shouting over each other. To busy shouting to notice their other friend, who had withdrawn from the group, looking exceedingly alarmed - both by the cacophony and the nauseating feeling in his gut, slowly making it's way up his throat and causing him to choke and splutter - still unnoticed by the group as a result of the clamour they were creating.

'GUYS SHUT UP A MINUTE.' Mike screamed, sighing in relief when the two boys obeyed. 'Thank you, where's Will?'

Lucas and Dustin burst back into chaos, Mike trying frantically to restore calm and failing to do so.

Abruptly their panicked bickering stopped, Dustin letting out a string of mumbled profanity before warily approaching the spot the missing boy had been moments before.

'I know exactly where he went.' said Dustin, prodding at the black, shell-less gastropod mollusc with the toe of his sneaker.

'Oh god. What do we do?'

'I can't believe we didn't even notice.'

'Gross! It's crawling up my bag someone get it off.'

'How long has he been missing?'

'It's been ages why isn't he back yet?'

'I think I'm going to puke.'

'What are we going to tell Joyce?'

'Nothing! He'll be back in a second. He has to.'

'Well I don't think he's there by choice.'

'Shut up Lucas, this really is not the time.'

'Wait maybe I'm going to pass out'

'We *didn't even notice.*'

'I'm going to throw up *and* pass out.'

'It's been nearly five minutes and that's just from when we realised.'

'Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit oh shit oh shit.'

'Dustin *breathe*. He'll be back in a second.'

'Man, are you *crying*?'

'WILL IS TRAPPED IN THE UPSIDE-DOWN AGAIN AND WE DIDN'T EVEN *NOTICE* SOMETHING WAS WRONG. SHUT UP!'

'It's okay, *it is going to be okay*. I'm going to get some stuff for when he gets back, okay guys?'

And when Mike returned a few minutes later, clutching a first-aid kit and a glass of water, a blanket and a cold-compress under his arm, Will was back. Dustin had him in a bone-crushing bear hug on the floor, Lucas on his knees beside them - looking slightly uncomfortable, but relieved all the same. 'You gave us quite a scare.' He said quietly, eyes narrowed in a mock-glare and the ghost of a smile gracing his lips.

'Are you okay?' Asked Mike, prying Dustin off the smaller boy and handing him the water, from which he took small, careful sips before replying.

'I'm okay.' Will shivered. His skin had taken on a greyish quality and the corners of his lips were blue. He opened and closed his mouth, as though he wanted to say more but words seemed to be failing him.

Mike handed Lucas the cold-compress, who then gingerly pressed it against Will's head, as Joyce had taught them. Michael Wheeler briefly scanned his friend for any injuries, and then Dustin wrapped the blanket around the youngest Byers' shoulders.

'When...when I was just there - in the upside-down - there was a girl.' Will interrupted himself with a cough. Mike's eyes were wide, he leaned forwards towards the other boy, now clinging onto his every word. 'She's in the fort. Your fort. She...she knew my name, she asked for you, Mike. I've seen her before. But I always came back before I could reach her. What does Eleven look like?'

Mike's heart was going erratic, it seemed to want to burst right through his ribcage. 'Um, she has dark, shaved hair and beau - brown - brown eyes. She was wearing a pink dress and a blue jacket - the last time we saw her.' He couldn't describe her properly, his head and

his heart were racing. *Please say he saw her. Please tell me she's alive. She has to be okay.*

Will tried his best to remember the details of the girl he had just seen. Things seemed to lose their colour, being in the upside-down, but he could recall a filthy, tattered dress and a damaged, oversized jacket. Grey was a more fitting colour than blue or pink, but he guessed the outfit had seen better, right-way-up days. She'd stared at him with dark, uncertain eyes and asked for Mike. It was all she said. Just 'Mike? Will. Will, where's Mike?' Over and over again. Her hair had grown an awful lot if it had been completely shaved before her time in the upside-down. It now came down to her shoulder blades in horrible clumpy matts. Will frowned, that seemed a little unlikely.

'How long has Eleven been in the upside-down?'

'Sixty two days.' Came Mike's immediate response. He didn't even have to think about it.

Will mulled this over. The hair thing was rather implausible, but how many other girls were there running about the upside-down? Calling for Mike and their friends? He took a deep tremulous breath, and nodded. 'It's got to be her.'

Mike felt like whooping with joy, or crying. El was alive, and he knew Will and Dustin would definitely believe him now, even if Lucas would probably take more convincing. Even though Mike had never been willing to give up on her, there had always been that dark, goading voice whispering in his ear. To know she had spoken to Will, that she remembered him, that *she asked for him*, was a relief. But she had been alone in that dark place for so long, with that toxic atmosphere and all the potential threats. He knew how much the upside-down had scarred Will, El had been there much longer - how had that place changed her? Would he really be getting *El* back?

'We have to find her.'

4. Crazy talk

A/N: Guys I am really, really sorry. I thought I'd already posted this chapter but tbh I'm seriously failing at this already yikes. Chapter five is on it's way I promise. And I've been working on some filler chapters. Also the lengths of my updates are incredibly inconsistent? What is this. Okay, ignoring the fact that I'm a shitty author, pleaseee stick around ?

-Bree

'NO, no. Absolutely not. That's crazy talk Mike. Look, I get it must be hard - we've helped you look for her, *in our own universe*. But there is absolutely no way I am going to be traipsing around the multiverses, looking for one temporal dimension that your could've-been girlfriend may be trapped in. And that's even if I thought there was a possibility that she might still be alive.' Lucas' words felt like a punch to the gut - to Dustin and Will too, not just Mike.

'What makes you think that it's a temporal dimension?' The question would have been slightly humorous, in other circumstances. Despite the looming threats, Dustin still found time to be curious and geeky. Or perhaps it was important to understand the upside-down to the best of their ability? Yeah, that too.

The answer rose from the lips of Will Byers, notwithstanding that the question had been directed at Lucas. 'Nothing ever changes, in the upside-down. It's like a snapshot of a certain point in time.'

'The moment El opened the gate?' Suggested Mike, who was then swiftly pounced on by Sinclair.

'What? So it *was* her fault? You want to open another gate, potentially allow more demogorgons and who knows how many other monsters into our home, in order to save the worst monster of them all? Just because you think she's *pretty*?'

'What the hell, Lucas! It isn't like that! You know it isn't! El is not a monster. She saved Will! She saved my life! She saved all of us. Countless times.'

'El is our friend,' Piped up Dustin. 'Friends look out for each other.'

'She's not our friend! Eleven is the one who got us into this mess...Face it Mike, she's gone! Will barely lasted a week in that place.' And with that he slung his backpack over his shoulder and headed towards the stairs. Practically convulsing with fury. He briefly paused to reject Dustin's cries of 'But El has superpowers, she's still -' with an irate 'Then why isn't she back? Why hasn't she even tried to communicate with us? With Mike?' The weight of his guilt increased with each step he took, until it crashed around his stomach like waves in a storm. But still he stomped away, focusing on keeping his footfall unnecessarily loud. Pride pushing him out the door. He thundered from Mike's and all the way home. Lumbering across the gravel and pounding up the stairs. Hurling his bag into the cupboard. Slamming the door shut again, before *finally*, crumpling onto his bed and staring up at the ceiling with burning eyes.

Man, you need some anger management classes. How can you be so selfish? So inconsiderate? That was low. That was really, really low.

The silence was horrendous. It left so much room for all the fatalistic, cynical, tormenting thoughts to spin around inside Mike's head. His own personal demogorgons. *Lucas is right, she's gone. I've lost her and I've broken every promise I made to her. I don't deserve to be her friend, never mind anything else. Am I really so selfish? Why do I keep asking my friends to risk their lives? Expecting them to understand and help me when I give them nothing in return? I don't deserve their friendship either.* Mike wanted to cry, he wanted to curl up into one big blubbering ball in the corner of El's fort and block out the rest of the world. But, despite the horrible strangling sensation in his throat, no tears came. Not that he could cry in front of Dustin and Will. That was one line of patheticness he promised himself he wouldn't ever cross. Worthless. Stupid. Naïve. Selfish. They were good adjectives for how he felt - what he was. He didn't notice the pale, sickly boy rise shakily to his feet and wobble over towards him. Mike jumped when a cold, bony hand poked him in the side.

'El's still there. We know she is. I saw her, and I talked to her. Barely ten minutes ago.' Will offered a small smile. His voice was incredibly gentle, and it held nothing of the patronising quality his mother and the majority of people at school, or any adult he happened to talk to

seemed to reserve for Mike. 'She asked for *you*, Mike. El needs *you*. Don't doubt yourself because of what Lucas said.'

5. The warmth of Michael Wheeler

The basement felt far too empty without Lucas. None of the boys had spoken to him since he walked out on them. He ignored any attempt at contact through the supercoms. And when they knocked at his door they were sent away, rejected by claims of migraines and fever. Perhaps it was the flu? Whatever it was, he didn't want company. Sinclair was missing from action. Mike had even risked sneaking into Nancy's room, to use her phone, but the line went dead after a single 'hello'.

There was a somewhat anxious atmosphere enshrouding the group of friends as they discussed the final plans for their next, and hopefully final, rescue mission. Mike Wheeler's fingertips drummed a relentless rhythm on the table top - a habit that was slowly slipping into his everyday. The sharp *taptaptaptaptap* was putting Dustin on edge.

'So, what've we got?'

'Well, I mean I've no wrist-rocket but I have a few of Jonathan's old hunting knives and - um, a gun.' Will's voice hushed as he mentioned the second item, as though he was embarrassed to have brought such a thing. 'I also have some rope and a couple of torches.' Byers added hurriedly, eyes downcast, inspecting the cracks and markings in the wood rather intently.

'WHERE IN HELL DID YOU GET THAT!' Screeched Dustin, grabbing at Will's bag like an excited child. He retrieved the loaded weapon, seeming oddly disappointed that it was only a small pistol. The other boy rubbed the back of his neck in response, mumbling something about a shed and Lonnie.

'I think its a good idea. I mean, I don't really want to use it. But protection is a good idea,' Reasoned Michael. He watched his friend run his hands over the gun's smooth edges apprehensively. As he looked at it, images of the 'bad men' flashed through his mind. Spying on them, a van cartwheeling through the air, the twisted government advancing on them, trying to snatch El away, and then, the classroom, Eleven, the demogorgon. Mike cleared his throat. 'Anyway, what have you brought, Dustin?'

'I'm glad you asked,' The curly haired boy proclaimed dramatically, emptying his rucksack onto the table. 'Lets see, we have the usual all-day-el-search meals, airheads, 3musketeers, mum's rocky road, apples, ew - a very crushed half eaten sandwich - sorry I had to skip breakfast this morning - oh, cookie dough bi-'

'Really?' 'You are not being serious.' 'Again?' The other two boys complaints merged together. One chorus of disappointed carping.

'*We need fuel for our travels.*' Dustin emphasised each individual letter, as though he was quoting Einstein or some other world-defining genius. Yet, upon noting Mike's face, he rapidly changed tactics. 'Okay. No. Lets just think about this logically for a second. Eleven has been stuck in the upside-down for how long now? I'm pret-'

'67 days.' Interjected Mike. Again, no thought.

'Yeah, exactly. Well, whatever food she's been surviving off of, I'm pretty sure it hasn't been the most enjoyable. How many open fast food places do you reckon there are in some snapshot dimension? She's probably starving to death! Point is, I bet she'd kill for a baby ruth.'

A slightly uncomfortable silence settled over the trio, Wheeler and Byers staring at the other disbelievingly, both mulling over the simple truth that Dustin was right. How had El *not* starved to death?

Unexpectedly, the third boy lunged forward - so suddenly that his red-peaked cap flopped to the ground. Snatching his bag from the table, he rummaged through the bottom and retrieved a cling-film wrapped package, holding it up in the air like a prize.

'Eggos!' He revealed, with the vigour of a pantomime actor. 'They're her favourite, right Mike?'

It was cold. And dark. El didn't like the cold. Or the dark. The lab was always both those things, this *place* was always both those things. She missed Mike. Mike was warmth. Mike was being rescued from the storms and soft sweaters. Constellations dusting across his skin and dark, soulful eyes. He was friendship and trust and kindness. Promises. Mike was gentle, hopeful.

She liked his eyes. She especially liked his stars. And she liked his hair. It looked soft, and she always got the urge to reach out and touch it. But she never did, it was, somehow, too...intimate. Eleven didn't know where she learnt that word, yet she knew it was right. Intimate. Like when they bumped mouths together. Being with Mike felt *intimate*. She liked Mike. In a different way to how she liked Dustin and Lucas, and Will too. A different like to how she felt about her other friends. She liked the way Mike made her feel. Safe and fuzzy and warm. Comfortable and a little nervous too. Fluttery. El wanted to bump mouths with Mike again, and to touch his hair and to listen to him talk, teach her things.

The barrier between home and the upside-down seemed thinner in some moments than in others. Sometimes, a pillow would move from her fort - all the way to the other side of the room - as though it had been thrown. A figurine would appear on the floor under the table. She would hear snippets of Mike playing D&D with his friends, his laughter and Dustin hyperventilating as fictional creatures chased after them, following the path marked out by Mike's imagination. A few moments of him reading to Holly; a number of seconds bickering with Nancy. Sometimes she would hear sniffing. Crying. It hurt her to know that Mike was sad.

She wanted to reach out to him, and ask him if he was okay. There wasn't ever any sign of Mike hearing El. She didn't have the energy to try calling out any louder.

She wanted to be there for him. Be with him. Occasionally, El could swear she felt his presence. Mike laying next to her, in the fort. Pressing against her back. She liked those nights. They weren't as cold. That's why she stayed in the fort he had built for her. Well, the duller, colder version, but it was still as close to Mike as she could be. The fort was reassuring, comforting. This was the place Mike had made to protect her, the place that kept her hidden from the bad men.

6. Can't turn back

A/N: PARDOGE, This fanfic is nowhere near finished, im just increasingly inconsitent and im sorryyy. This update is sorta short, and its been complete for awhile - Ive just had absolutely no motivation for writting or editing - but im back on track and im writting the next chapter for you guys right now.

I'm also trying out a few bughead fic ideas, if you're interested? and balancing school and homework and stuff so please be patient with me. (We've just had easter break an I was on a volunteer trip in Ghana - which i really really recommend if you ever get the chance, but that meant no extra writing time. But this term is a short one!) Also thank you so much for the lovely pm's and reviews, especially Resisting-Moonlight who has left a review on every single update so far. Your support is seriously so amazing, thank you for sticking around x

-Bree

'Mike, c'mon we should head back. This isn't right. I've got a weird feeling about this.' Dustin had been going on like this for the last few hours. Much to his frustration, Mike and Will mostly ignored his droning, aside for the death glares that clearly read 'Dustin, *shut up*.' But it was dark, it was cold, he was out of candy. He was hungry. He had to keep the Eggos for finding El and heroically saving her ass, even though it was way more likely that she'd end up saving theirs. And regardless of how regular traipsing through woods at midnight had become, habit wouldn't replace the anxiety. The thin, twisted branches reached towards him, grabbing at the fabric of his coat and stretching for his cap. Like the arms of a demogorgon. Plus, Will looked like he was going to throw up.

'I'd feel safer if Lucas were here,' He continued, glancing back over his shoulder. 'What happened to safety in numbers?'

'We can't turn back ' It was the first time Michael had spoken for an uncomfortably long time, and his rushed words shocked the other two boys into silence. It sounded as though Mike was forcing out the words, syllables squeezing out past a lump in his throat. That wasn't

right. He was calm, in control. He planned the D&D campaigns and he planned the rescue missions. He was the leader of their little adventures. Byers thought he heard Mike whisper something else, something along the lines of 'I'm honest.' or 'I promised.'

He didn't question it.

The boys trekked forward, arranged in a triangle formation. Mike was in the lead, Dustin to the left; Will on the right. Lucas would've usually taken up the rear. Each held a knife, gripping them incorrectly and seeming immensely uncertain about the tool. The trio walked slowly, cautiously. Inspecting every tree and shrub and rock, eyes squinted in an attempt to see beyond the wavering beams of light cast from their torches. The moon was full but it's illuminating glow was dimmed, obscured by the dense clustering of trees. An owl hooted off in the distance. Leaves and broken branches crackled and crunched under their footfall. There was nothing else to hear.

A crimson clump of grass caught Mike's attention. Blood. Dried blood, to be precise. The substance made a snaking path from Mike's feet to the base of a tree stump, where the trail stopped dead. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but squirrels and small birds do not happen to drag bleeding prey off up into trees.

Cautiously, the middle-child of the Wheeler family crouched down beside the remains of the tree, placing his hand on it's side for support. It came away covered in slime.

'Demogorgon gunk.' Squeaked Dustin.

The surface of the stump was completely blackened, charred away as though it had been burned. Mike suddenly worried that the 'Demogorgon gunk' was corrosive, and hurriedly wiped his fingertips on the grass beside his sneakers. There was a large, shallow, roughly semi-circular dip in part of the wood, as though there had been a hole or opening. He felt peculiarly at ease, despite the situation.

'Do you think this could've been the portal?'

'It has to have been. But, it looks so dead.'

And that was when they heard it, a low gurgling grumble. Comparable to the snarl of a motor. A sinister purr that traced its fingers down your spine and sent icy shivers through your body.

Demogorgon.

Dustin's stomach let out a grumble of complaint. It had awful timing. The monster seemed to mimic the noise. Henderson made another whimper, this time it emitted from his throat. All he could think was 'Let me be the only hungry one, god Jesus please.'

The creature roared once more and the stump slanted to the side. Towards Mike. The stump shifted again, then again, and again. The creature didn't seem to be able to get through.

Apparently the portal *was* dead.

Apparently the demogorgon was still alive.

7. Beautifully mundane

'SHIT!' Cried Dustin, looking to the other two boys for instructions. Every fibre of his being was screaming at him to flee. To get as far away from the decaying tree/portal as physically possible. Book a plane ticket to west Africa and never look back. Absolutely anyplace, anywhere, would be better than this second. Inches yet multiverses away from the demon intent on kidnapping his friends and locking them in another realm. A twisted government hybrid determined to destroy the peaceful serenity of their beautifully mundane town.

God, you're overreacting.

You're -at least- a few yards away.

You were closer to the same nightmare mere months ago, and you were a hell of a lot more composed.

Relax, stop being such a baby. Look at Mike and Will. Mike is RIGHT next to the portal and he's not as scared as you. Don't be a coward. You owe this to Eleven. Don't run. You probably wouldn't even like Africa.-

His critical thoughts didn't do much to dissipate his anxiety, but it did fortify the reasons for why he had to stay. El had done everything in her power to protect them, she sacrificed herself and gave up the promise of the happy life she'd never experienced to save *them*.

Sweet, innocent El, with those wide brown eyes he knew Mike adored, not that he would ever admit it out loud, who had known nothing of kindness and promises and friendship or family and safety, but all about deceit and bad men and hurting and monsters. She needed their help.

'The demogorgon is being very noisy tonight.' El informed the pillow to her left. Well, really she was talking to Mike, but she couldn't see him, couldn't know if he was even listening. Suddenly the cushions and books surrounding her became blurry, and Eleven was blinking back tears. She'd found a few books resting on a mouldy shelf in the upside-down version of Mike's basement and, although the covers were wrinkled and dull, the writing inside was still legible. El was

teaching herself how to read, she wanted to learn new words to impress her friends when she found them again. Soon she was going to know as many words as Mike. 'I think it is angry. It's ag-ri-va-ted.' A pleased smile raised the corners of her lips. She had discovered that word earlier today.

One of the women who worked for Papa, Miss Cassy, had tried teaching El how to read. She had been a short woman, with crinkly eyes and a round face, she helped subject 011 to dress and wash. But Papa had found out about the unauthorised lessons and El hadn't even seen her again. One time El tried to ask Cassy's friend about what had happened. She became angry and tearful and had struck El, telling her not to speak unless asked a direct question and said that Eleven was to blame for her sister's death.

That woman wasn't as nice as Miss Cassy. Nobody working for papa was ever nice or gentle or kind. The soft, sleepy smile disappeared.

Not now, please not now.

That all-to-familiar sensation was swirling around inside the stomach of Will Byers as he trailed behind his friends. And suddenly he was retching, coughing and spluttering as the trapped fragments of another universe forced their way out his throat.

His companions were grabbing at him, fully aware that there was nothing they could do. Dustin Henderson had successfully reached the epitome of his hysteria, Mike not far behind.

'What do we do, oh god what do we do?'

'I don't know, I don't know! Uhm, just - just get him as far away from the portal as possible. Hopefully it won't notice and he'll be home soon.' Tears were now prickling the corners of his eyes, softening his focus on reality and making it near-impossible to watch out for the snarling roots that attempted to trip him as he helped yank the young boy through the dense foliage.

In an instant, two of his friends would be trapped in a foreign realm, potentially face-to-face with the predatory government monster, known to them as the demogorgon. It wasn't a happy thought.

Yet he was forced to watch as his childhood friend disappeared before him.

Then snapped back into focus, hardly a second later.

As tangible and absolute as the decaying mulch surrounding him.

8. Hot tears

One hundred and forty seven seconds had passed before the trio of friends, simultaneously, realised what had happened to them. One hundred and forty seven seconds before Dustin's panicked muttering resumed; one hundred and forty seven seconds before a wide-eyed Will Byers exhaled a small whisper of 'I'm a dimension-travelling mini bus.'

Michael, however, seemed to have a completely unique outlook on their current predicament. He was not afraid or anxious. He didn't even appear to be shocked. In fact, he looked...happy? The happiest either of his companions had seen him for a long, long time. Months. Just over two months, to be exact.

'We're in the upside-down! Guys, come on, we have to find El. We don't know how much time we have.' Excitement bubbled beneath Mike's hushed tone and oblivious to his surroundings, he immediately turned and bounded forward - heading towards the twisted, rotting version of his home.

'Mike! Slow down,' Hissed Will, chasing after him. 'We need to be careful, we know the demogorgon is nearby. Stay together.' His reprimanding was lost on the elder boy and Mike strode forward all the same. Dustin silently shadowed his friends, taking particular care in memorising his surroundings and looking out for the demogorgon.

The freckle-faced boy eventually slowed as he reached their destination, something similar to devastation stirring inside as he took in the horror before him. For sixty-eight days, he had almost been drowning in his own self pity, feeling isolated by the loss of El. But Eleven really had been all alone. No friends, no family; nobody at all. Nothing but rotting structures and festering slime to keep her company.

Relying more heavily on the support and reassurance his friends offered than on his trembling knees, Michael Wheeler crept through the building.

Glutinous tendrils of vines and matter snaked across the faded carpets

and torn wallpaper, guiding the children towards the basement door and as they tiptoed down the aging steps - ensuring that the creaking wood was stable before allowing their full weight to rest upon it - they began to call out.

'El?' 'El?' 'Eleven?' 'Are you here?'

However, as they reached the bottom of the staircase and scanned the room, thoughts similar to resignation crossed their minds. Eleven was not there.

A knife twisted in Mike's guts. He was sure she was going to be here. He'd been counting on it, hoping so desperately. There was nowhere left. If she was in the upside-down she would be in the fort, the place Mike had built to hide her. Right?

His hurt was clear to the eye, and neither of the other boys were quite sure what they should do or say. After a hopelessly long silence, Will finally spoke up.

'Maybe we should try castle Byers? It kept me safe while I was here.'

Numbly, frogface nodded and turned to leave, head remaining downcast to obscure the tears brimming in his eyes.

Yet Michael Wheeler never made it to the top of the stairs. A faint, wheezing cough bounced off of the tension in the room and the three young boys raced towards the noise.

Subject 011 was positioned delicately among the faded cushions of her fort, partially obscured from their previous angle, blackened dress and dirt stained skin allowing her to blend into her grimy surroundings.

'Eleven.' Gasp'd her freckle-faced friend, dropping to his knees beside her and rousing her from sleep, no longer bothering to hide the hot tears sliding across his cheeks.

'Mike?' She whispered hoarsely, reaching towards him, softly cupping his cheek in her hand, her fingertips meeting the dampness of his salty tears, the smooth sensation of his warm skin; his high cheekbones. The contrast between his pale skin and adorable freckles

was even more striking up close. El pulled her hand back slightly, and then - hesitantly - brushed a piece of hair back from his face. It *was* soft. Her thoughts abruptly flickered back to in the school cafeteria, to how Mike had pushed his lips against hers. The smile stretching her features was beginning to hurt her cheeks, but she didn't stop. She was positively beaming. Mike had found her. He had been listening; looking. 'Oh, Mike.' Cautiously, the space between them was decreasing. Closer, closer, and closer still. Mike's warm breath tickled the tip of her nose. Closer. Closer.

'Erm, guys.' Dustin cleared his throat. 'I hate to kill the mood, but...' The curly-haired boy was also crying. An ecstatic grin spread across his face, but tears marking lines in the layer of filth on his skin nonetheless.

The third boy was also a tad emotional, although admittedly not as much as his two friends, he mostly felt ill. He smiled at the young girl laying beside his friend. 'Wanna go home?'

9. Reunited

A/N: Hey guys. I'm really sorry about not uploading. My mousepad had stopped working on my notebook so I couldn't use it to work on any of my stories. It's been driving me crazy but it's working okay now and only relatively glitchy. So, here is the next update

~Bree

The filthy group of pre-teens toppled over one another as they once again found themselves in the correct-way-up basement of the Wheeler household. Dusting themselves off and unsteadily helping each other to their feet, the only girl in the group opened her mouth as though to say something. And abruptly crumpled to the carpeted floor.

'We don't know if it's safe to take her there. We could be endangering her even further. Brenner and the Department of Energy may still be hanging around.' Chief Hopper tried to reason in a stern whisper. His steady hands gripped the shoulders of Joyce Byers in a form of reassurance.

'Please, Hop, we have to at least try. We can't give up on her now that we finally have her back.'

The pair glanced back at the circle of friends. Mike sat closest to the young girl, hunched over her still-unconscious form. The tears had stopped but his bottom lip still trembled and none of the boys could escape the tight burning sensation in the backs of their throats. Will had briefly gone over to Lucas', and while the dark-skinned boy hadn't said anything while his friend was there, a short five minutes later he appeared on the Byer's porch, extended his hand to Mike, softly mummering 'I drew first blood, I'm sorry. El's one of us.' And crouched beside his friends on the cool floor inside.

Another quick discussion between adults, and El was being taken to the hospital. Upon their arrival, the staff didn't have much time to react or ask questions. She was rushed to an empty room, hurridley washed down and swapped into a hospital gown; then attached to life

supports. To add to the boys frustration and worry, they were ordered to stay in the waiting room while the doctors and nurses tended to Eleven, but the final report brought them some minor relief.

'For the most part, we are unsure as to why the girl collapsed. She's suffering from mild dehydration and malnutrition, yet the good news is her vitals appear to be stable and she should be waking up shortly, in a few days time at most.' The balding doctor informed them after briefly consulting the blue clipboard he held.

In unison, the two adults and four kids left to their feet. 'Can we see her now?' They chorused. The man's eyes flickered over the children's damaged, mud-spattered clothing, lips pursed.

'Well, the visitors limit is 3 people, but I can see you boys are very eager to see your friend. Go ahead.' said the doctor, with a kindly smile gracing his features, then turned his attention towards Joyce and Hopper. 'But I need to ask some questions. Sir, Madam, come with me please.'

He led them to a small room that held minimal decorations. A small desk was pushed into the far left corner of the room, tidy stacks of documents sat on one side, a small framed photo of a young boy situated at the other. A wooden chain was behind the desk, in which the man sat, and a matching rickety chair the otherside. Hopper gestured for Joyce to take the seat, and stood behind her, arms resting on the back of her chair.

'Now, in order for us to continue taking care of the child, we need to know who she is, and what happened to her. Do you know where her parents are?' He began.

10. A comatose state

Joyce Byer's dark eyes flickered up to meet Hoppers gaze, and an unspoken agreement was made. Scrunching her eyebrows together and faking confusion she turned back towards the doctor and said, 'We're...we are her parents.'

'Oh, I'm sorry I hadn't realised. Well, can you tell me what happened to her?'

'She, uh, she went missing around two months ago. Her brother and their friends found her in the woods early this morning, just before she blacked out. We don't know what happened to her.' Jim informed.

'I see. I'm sorry for what your family has been through. I can assure you the staff here at the hospital will do everything we can to take care of your daughter.' Reassured the doctor in response. 'I take it the police have been aware of your situation.'

At this, Jim Hopper merely raised a single eyebrow. Granted, he was out of uniform, but his badge gleamed at the waistband of his jeans, signaling him out to be the chief of police.

'Ah, yes.' The tall balding man began rifling through the stacks of paper upon his desk. 'Now, could you please fill out these forms.'

Mike intertwined Eleven's cold, pale hand in his clammy, equally pale fingertips. This wasn't exactly what he had been imagining as he had begged every unseen higher being that could've possibly have been listening to bring her home.

Nobody had spoken much at all since they entered the room, or even since they had entered the hospital. But eventually Lucas broke the silence with a low 'Uhm hey guys, does anybody want a drink or something?' He had been watching his friend with a concerned gaze, and had decided Mike should be alone with El for awhile. Will quickly caught on, jumping up from his seat with the offer to help; nudging Dustin and rousing him from his seat with a pointed look and a glance towards Mike when he didn't do the same.

Will turned around as he opened the door, 'We'll be back in like 15 minutes, okay Mike? We'll look for Hopper and my mum too.'

Joyce slid the now-completed documents back over the desk to be promptly checked over by the hospital official, who immediately looked up in surprise. 'Byers? Your son, Will Byers, also went missing - correct?'

A peculiar shiver ran down Joyce's spine at his words. 'Yes. He did. We're very lucky to have them both back.' She was noticeably uncomfortable, and Hopper reassuringly placed his hand upon her shoulder once more.

'Can we see our daughter now?'

Shortly after the others had left Mike alone with El, a short, plump woman rapped lightly on the door and entered, clipboard in hand. 'Hello, love, I'm just going to check everything is in order and I'll leave you two be.' She offered up a polite smile that reached her grey-green eyes and spoke with a subtle Northern-British accent Mike had never heard before, then busied herself with her task.

Just as she turned to leave, Mike managed to force his voice past the lump in his throat and asked, 'She is going to be okay, right?'

'I think she just might, there is no reason why she shouldn't. She's just a bit on the skinny side, that's all. So she's going to have to stay here for a little while.' She paused and smiled thoughtfully for a second. 'You know, once a patient has woken up, they often say they could hear while they were in the comatose state. You should talk to her.' With another bright smile, she swept from the room. And Mike began to talk.

He told her about everything that had happened while she was gone. He told her about how Nancy and Jonathan were together now, but they were best friends with Steve. He told her about the latest D&D campaign, how he felt bad because his heart hadn't really been it and it'd had far too many loose ends. He told her about their failed attempts to find her, and the argument with Lucas. He told her about how the A.V. club had temporarily been suspended due to all the meetings he had canceled when she first disappeared. He told her

that he didn't know if she could really hear him, but he had missed her, and he was so glad that she was back. But she had to wake up soon. And when he had nothing left to say, he leaned forward, and gently brushed his lips against the gentle curve of her cheek.

For a brief second images of Holly's fairytale books flickered through his mind. The one where the prince kisses his sleeping princess and the curse is lifted. But they were not royalty, nor were they living in a fairytale.

When the boys eventually returned, accompanied by the adults, Mike was sat rubbing circles against the back of Eleven's hand with his thumb.

'What's going to happen to her?' He asked as soon as he made eye contact with Joyce.

11. AN

Hi

Its been two years since I've last logged into this account. (and it was a hell of a struggle to finally get back in, I can never remember my passwords)

Firstly, I would like to apologise, I know how annoying it is when an author abandons a story halfway through its plot, but another part of me wants to take that apology straight back. I'm tired of seeing apologetic Authors Notes and a thousand and one excuses at the top of every chapter that I read, we should not feel the need to apologise for a lack of consistency on a site like this. Isn't the whole point for us to be writing for our own enjoyment? This is our art, and I'm so fed up of seeing people feeling insane amounts of pressure and guilt over something we are supposed to enjoy. After all, most of us here are just kids/teens, we have school, jobs, family and a million other commitments. More than that, we're allowed to lose interest in certain things, even if they will always have a tiny place in our hearts.

Therefore, I do not feel as though I owe it to anyone other than myself to someday finish this story if that is what I want to do, and I'm typing out this excessive tirade as I personally feel it is beyond important for more authors on here, and any other creators on any other platform, to adopt this mentality; so I feel it is something that ought to be said; even at the risk of backlash for making myself appear like an absolute twat.

So, I'm finally adding a conclusion to this story (not a conclusion I suppose, more of a definitive end) not to apologise, but to thank.

This is the first story I ever wrote, at all. Outside of stories for my primary school English, that is, and I was so unbelievably nervous about displaying my words out on the internet, even though the characters and the story isn't even really mine.

It takes an unbelievable amount of courage for any creator to allow others a chance to see and appreciate their content, and since writing

this story I have a newfound awe and respect for those that chose to share themselves through any sort of medium.

But my main point here is that I wouldn't have ever been able to continue this story for so long (and I wouldn't keep finding myself back at this site) if it wasn't for the loving community and insane amount of support that I have received. I want to say a special thank you to

Resisting-Moonlight ([u/609932/](#)) who always left a kind, wonderful review on almost every single one of my chapters, you deserved an end to this more than anyone :)

lovingly as ever, bree x

p.s. im considering writing a BBxRAE fic, or maybe some oneshots, to pull me over until titans season two comes out because for some reason I am currently completely obsessed with them as a pairing and I've really been frantically searching for every scrap of content about them for the last three days or so, so keep an eye out if that's something you'd be interested in!

I will not be apologising for any inconsistency! (except maybe if it takes me two whole years again)